

Pronunciation matters

Robin Walker argues for more emphasis on a neglected area.

If you ask students which areas of learning English matter most, they'll inevitably include pronunciation. If you ask teachers, you get much the same response. But if you look more carefully at what actually happens in the classroom, you'll discover that all too often pronunciation is usually done on an ad-hoc basis, that it is not usually programmed in the way that grammar or vocabulary are, and that it is quite often relegated to an 'add-on' activity for when there is time in the class, or dropped altogether when there isn't.

This is a sad state of affairs because pronunciation matters, and it matters a lot. In fact, rather than being peripheral to learning English, it is absolutely central to the learning process. Indeed, poor pronunciation can have a very serious effect on everything else we try to do in the English language classroom, as we shall now see.

1 The impact on speaking

The first and most obvious impact of poor pronunciation is on speaking. Saying a word or a name, only to be met by the blank stare of the listener's incomprehension is immensely frustrating for learners.

We know this, of course. We're teachers. But it is easy for us to forget just how serious the impact of poor pronunciation is on our learners' fluency and confidence, which is why we need something to jog our memories from time to time. This happened to me recently when I was travelling in Poland. My lack of confidence in my pronunciation left me hopelessly dumb

on many occasions. And the more I struggled to get words out of my mouth, the less willing I was to try to do so.

In general, when learners find a word difficult to pronounce they avoid using it. As teachers, we frequently interpret this as limited vocabulary rather than poor pronunciation. I spent over 20 years teaching English for tourism, and always asked my final-year students to give a short presentation on tourism management as part of their

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oral assessment. At their level, the word *infrastructure* is hard to avoid in a presentation like this, but for Spanish speakers of English it is also very hard to pronounce. Some of my students would go to considerable lengths to avoid the word in their presentations, and initially I would complain of their limited vocabulary. Similarly, the word *usually* is hard for many learners because of the /ʒ/ sound. The more adept students wisely avoid *usually* altogether, preferring to say *normally* instead. But once again, they are avoiding a word because of pronunciation problems.

Many learners also avoid grammar structures that they find hard to

pronounce. A classic example of this is third conditionals. These are not conceptually difficult for most learners, and they don't cause too many problems with written practice exercises. But they are noticeably absent from most intermediate learners' spoken English. This is usually because the contractions, vowel reductions and consonant clusters in a sentence like *If I'd know about English consonants, I'd've learned Chinese instead* are actually very difficult to articulate. Faced with the significant pronunciation difficulties of English third conditionals, learners either avoid the structure altogether, or simplify it to things like *If I know, I learn Chinese*. Can we blame them? No. Can we help them? Yes. Do they need more grammar exercises? No. Do they need help with pronunciation? Yes.

2 The impact on listening

The second obvious problem of poor pronunciation is its impact on listening. The most immediately tangible issue here is that learners either fail to identify the sounds, words or phrases of English, or they confuse them with others. At the level of individual sounds, for example, poor recognition leads to confusion between words that differ by only one sound (minimal pairs). Classic examples are *tree* and *three*, or *hat*, *hut*, *hot* and *heart*, but there are countless more.

In the 80s and 90s, of course, we were told that learners would use context to solve any ambiguities between minimal pairs. More recently, however, research has supported the need for learners to be able to distinguish clearly between individual phonemes, either because, as Jennifer Jenkins asserts, lower-level learners fail to make appropriate use of contextual clues, or because, as John Field points out, automatic recognition of individual sounds and whole words

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frees the brain's processing power for other aspects of listening.

At the level of full phrases, poor pronunciation skills can mean that listeners do not capture the significance of specific patterns of sentence stress. For example, if we asked a group of students working on an exercise *Who's finished?* (with the stress on *finished*) we would expect the students who had completed the exercise to raise their hands. In contrast, if we were to ask *Who hasn't finished?* with the stress on *hasn't*, we would hope that the students who were still working on the exercise would raise their hands.

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In my own experience, whenever I ask that second question, I inevitably see students raising their hands who *have* finished the exercise. This would suggest that these students don't perceive the stress on *hasn't*, or that they perceive the stress but fail to give it any communicative value. Either way, their raised hands tell me that they are wrongly constructing meaning around the main verb *finished*. That is to say, their poor pronunciation skills have impacted badly on their understanding of meaning at sentence level.

However, perhaps the most significant impact of poor pronunciation on listening occurs at the level of *extended* rather than *micro*-listening. Faced with a long recording – of one or even two minutes, say – many learners seem to switch off. As their teachers, we become aware of this when we see their eyes glaze over or their faces go blank. What is happening here is that because of poor pronunciation skills, these learners are having to use too much of the processing power of their short-term memories in the recognition of individual sounds or complete words in the flow of speech. As a result, their short-term memories simply 'overload', and this in turn leaves them unable to

process new data that arrives, which means that they lose the thread of the text as a whole.

On identifying a student as having problems with listening, we often prescribe additional extended listening work for that student. But unless the underlying pronunciation problems are dealt with first, this additional listening work will only create further failure, and will confirm the learner's view that they don't understand spoken English.

3 The impact on writing

If the impact of poor pronunciation on speaking and listening feels familiar to most English teachers, the idea that pronunciation can impact negatively on writing will probably come as a surprise. However, one of the major headaches for learners of English is the absence of any clear, simple relationship between how words are *spelt* in English and how they *sound* in speech.

In another of my Polish adventures, I had to travel to a city that was called *Wooch*, or at least that is the way it seemed to my inexperienced ears. Try as I might, I couldn't see the name of that city on the indicator board at the station in Warsaw. This was hardly surprising in retrospect, since the name I was looking for was Łódź.

My invented spelling (*Wooch*) was the product of my poor understanding of the sound-spelling relationships in Polish. That is to say, it was a problem of poor pronunciation skills. The same thing happens with students learning English, and apart from the issue of missing trains, 'invented' spellings make it impossible for learners to check new words in a dictionary. Try looking up a word like *photograph*, for example, if you think it begins with an *f*. Find the word *city*, if you think it begins with an *s*.

In addition, invented spellings find their way into students' written work although, as teachers, we seldom see pronunciation as the origin. Some of these invented spellings can create real words that have a totally different meaning from the intended word. My Year 2 tourism students regularly described one of their region's most prized fish dishes as 'Hake in crap sauce'. The most significant difference between *crab* and *crap* is the longer vowel in *crab*. Spanish, however, does not have the vowel length distinctions of

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English and so, although I was saying *crab* correctly in class, my students were perceiving *crap*, and this was carrying through into their written work.

Less embarrassing, perhaps, was the regular appearance of *festival* at the beginning of a series of points in the 'for-and-against' type essays my Year 3 students were required to produce: *Festival, I want to talk about the advantages of tourism. Festival, we need to look at the history of tourism.* Try as I might, I couldn't work out where they had got this use of the word from. Eventually, I asked a group of students about it, only to be told that it was a phrase I used constantly at the beginning of my classes. The light went on – I was saying *first of all*, and they were hearing *festival*.

4 The impact on reading

Although we expect poor pronunciation to impact negatively on speaking and listening, and we can soon see how it might impact on writing, many of teachers I've worked with initially find it hard to see any relationship between pronunciation and reading. However, recent research shows that poor pronunciation has a very serious impact on reading, especially for learners from beginner to intermediate level.

When we read a text, we process the words on the page or screen in our brain's short-term memory (sometimes also called the working memory). This processing is controlled by the 'central executive' of the short-term memory, which sends the words around a 'phonological loop' in order to prepare them for their storage in the long-term memory. As the words go around the phonological loop, we say them 'aloud' inside our heads. This is known as 'sub-vocalisation'.

As you read this article, you are actually 'saying' the words to yourself inside your head as part of the process of storing them. Because you are an expert user of English, this process is automatic and completely efficient. However, research has shown that if we don't know the correct pronunciation of a word, the

'sound trace' of that word as it is being sent around the phonological loop can suffer decay. Words that are subject to decay are not sufficiently well-processed to be dealt with by the central executive when they get back there (if they get back there at all), and so they cannot be sent off to the long-term memory for permanent storage.

The overall outcome of these events in the short-term memory is that after a short while, the reader has no recollection of what they have just read. Too many words were lost in the phonological loop and failed to reach the long-term memory. Because of this, the reader has to go back to the beginning of the text and start again. As with listening, it is all

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too easy for us, as teachers, to spot 'poor readers' and to try to help them by giving them additional reading activities. But these won't be effective if we don't get to the root of the problem, which is poor pronunciation.

ELT author and Oxford University applied linguistics researcher, Catherine Walter, has worked on the problems of L2 reading for some time now. She surprised a lot of experienced teachers with the conclusion to her talk on L2 reading at the 2008 IATEFL conference. Later, in an article published in *Speak Out!* (the newsletter of the IATEFL Pronunciation Special Interest Group) she repeated her argument that everything we currently know about the way we read in a second language 'suggests strongly that teaching phonology will help L2 learners to read better'. In the same article, she went on to say that 'the sorts of activities that pronunciation-conscious teachers have been using for decades will be useful for developing L2 reading comprehension skills: activities like minimal pair recognition activities, activities for recognising stress patterns and dictations of sentences containing confusable words'.

Pronunciation: the heart of the matter

It should be obvious by now that I firmly believe that pronunciation is not just another aspect of learning English. Rather, it lies at the very heart of what we do, and neglecting it can have very serious implications for our learners' chances of making adequate progress in all other areas. We've seen in detail how this is true for each of the four language skills, but similar arguments can be made for the impact of poor pronunciation on the teaching/learning of grammar and vocabulary. One recent grammar book, for example, includes a CD of pronunciation exercises directly related to each of the grammar areas covered in it. Similarly, good coursebooks and good ELT teaching materials tie vocabulary work into pronunciation practise.



In future issues of *ETp* I will consider a number of different aspects of teaching pronunciation, beginning with pronunciation for young learners, and going on to pronunciation for teenagers. I will then discuss what we can do with the learner's mother-tongue pronunciation in the English class, and finally take a critical look at some of the technology that is now available to help learners with their pronunciation. Hopefully, through these five articles – but most importantly, through your application of their contents – we can put pronunciation back into ELT classrooms in a principled, meaningful way. **ETp**

Field, J *Listening in the Language Classroom* CUP 2008

Jenkins, J *The Phonology of English as an International Language* OUP 2000

Walter, C 'Teaching phonology for reading comprehension' *Speak Out!* 40 2009



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